

Why literacy for all?¹

Por que alfabetização para todos?

Pourquoi l’ alphabétisation pour tous?

Agneta LIND

RESUMO

Este artigo é parte do livro *Literacy for all: Making a difference*, da mesma autora, a ser publicado pela UNESCO. Para tanto, destacamos, especialmente o capítulo 4 da referida obra, tendo em vista a importância que a mesma atribui a alfabetização de adultos. Tal capítulo, dentre outras questões importantes, procura responder a seguinte questão: Por que alfabetização para todos? Finalmente, o artigo apresenta a alfabetização como direito humano e democrático e como possibilidade de potencializar aqueles que a detém.

Palavras-chave: alfabetização de adultos, democratização, empoderamento.

ABSTRACT

This article is part of the book “Literacy: Making difference”, written by the same author, to be published by UNESCO. For in such a way, we detach, especially chapter 4 because its important contributions to adults literacy. This chapter, amongst other important questions, answer us about the following question: Why literacy for all? Finally, the article presents the literacy as right democratic human being and as possibility of empowerment.

Index terms: Literacy of adults, democratization, empowerment.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article fait partie du livre *Literacy for all : Makingthe difference*, du même auteur, qui sera publié par l'UNESCO. Nous détachons, spécialement le chapitre 4, en vue de l'importance qu'il attribue à l'alphabétisation des adultes. Ce chapitre, parmi d'autres questions importantes, cherche à

¹ Este artigo é parte de obra a ser publicada pela UNESCO da mesma autora intitulada: *Literacy for all: Making a difference*.

répondre à la question suivante: Pourquoi l'alphabétisation pour tous? Finalement, l'article présente l'alphabétisation comme droit humain et démocratique et comme possibilité de mettre en évidence ceux qui la détiennent.

Mots-clés: alphabétisation d'adultes, démocratisation, mettre en évidence

List of abbreviations

ABE	Adult basic education
ABED	Adult basic education and development
ABET	Adult basic education and training
ABLE	Adult basic learning and education
ADB	Asian Development Bank
ADEA	Association for Development of Education in Africa
AIDS	Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome
CBO	Community-based organization
CONFINTEA	International conference on adult education
CSO	Civil society organization
EFA	Education for All
EWLP	Experimental World Literacy Programme
GPI	Gender Parity Index
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
IALS	International Adult Literacy Survey
ICT	Information and communication technology

IIEP	International Institute for Educational Planning
LAMP	Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme
LIFE	Literacy Initiative for Empowerment
LLL	Life-long learning
LWL	Life-wide learning
MDG	Millennium Development Goal
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NFE	Non-formal education
ODA	Overseas Development Agency
PE	Primary education
PRA	Participatory rural appraisal
PRSP	Poverty reduction strategy paper
REFLECT techniques	Regenerated Freirean literacy through empowering techniques
SIL	Summer Institute of Linguistic
UIL	UNESCO Institute of Lifelong Learning
UIS	UNESCO Institute of Statistics
UK	United Kingdom
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO Organization	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNLD	United Nations Literacy Decade
UPE	Universal primary education

USD United States dollar

USAID United States Agency for International Development

Why literacy for all, not just school children? Why literacy for all?

The question “Why literacy?” may seem simple, especially in today’s globalized world, where ICTs require more and more sophisticated literacy skills. Nonetheless, as soon as we ask why literacy should be for all, the answers become more complex, and even more so when we ask why adult literacy matters. One of the reasons for this is that the answers often cover a wide range of justifications related to either basic values, such as social justice, or the assumed effects of literacy, such as economic growth. Before reviewing some of the most common of these justifications either in favour of or against significant investments in literacy for all, including adults, it should be stressed that literacy (skills) in itself is only a potential communication tool or asset that may or may not be used for a great variety of purposes. As a capacity it can be more or less mastered, and without application it can easily be lost or become meaningless. There is no automatic effect of literacy; it depends on the process of acquisition, the context, and how and for what it is used.

The right to education, as recognized in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other binding international conventions, is strongly rooted in the right to literacy. Education and literacy, or knowledge and literacy, are often equated in these conventions. This is also often the case in literature discussing the importance of mass literacy. Arguments in favour of literacy for all are consequently often the same as those for education for all. When the benefits and impact of literacy are reviewed, a similar mixture

can often be found. For example, when research findings about the impact of literacy or basic education on adult women's reproductive health or farmer productivity are reported, they do not necessarily specify when in the life cycle these adults acquired literacy or completed a certain number of years of basic education.

In this chapter the main justifications for literacy for all, irrespective of how or at what age it is acquired, will be addressed. Then the question "Why adult literacy matters" will be discussed.

Literacy as a human and democratic right

Literacy is a human and democratic right. People who are able to use their literacy skills to defend their legal rights are at an advantage compared to people without this ability. Those whose rights are violated (especially women) by others with more power are often the poorest and most marginalized. Their inability to read and write prevents them from seeing for themselves what they are entitled to demand and why. This is also closely linked to feelings of limitation and insecurity which impedes their participation in political arenas by expressing demands and having a voice. It is certainly possible for people without basic literacy skills to participate in community affairs and, for example, vote, but people with such skills are more likely to participate, because they often feel more confident and because they can make better use of written information and communication (see Hamadache, 1990).

Although, as previously pointed out, there is no given or automatic impact of the acquisition of literacy skills, literacy is an additional value for a person's, a family's and a community's life. A child who is denied the right

to primary education is not only deprived as a child, but also handicapped throughout life as a person unable to cope with situations that require reading, writing and arithmetic. Literacy is a right which expands people's freedom, and as such requires social support. It is a right which constitutes the very foundation of human development according to the Nobel prize winner economist Amartya Sen (see e.g. UNESCO, 2003).

Literacy as a capability and contribution to empowerment

Whatever the causal effects look like, progress in literacy and progress in human development often coincide, just as illiteracy and poverty do. Poverty is not just lack of income, but also deprivation of capabilities. Literacy contributes to strengthening the capabilities of individuals and families to benefit from existing opportunities such as health, education, political freedom and income.

According to Sen (UNESCO, 2003), literacy and numeracy skills acquired through basic education are also very important in helping people to access the opportunities of global commerce and employment. For example, he points out that "A person who cannot read instructions, understand the demands of accuracy and follow the demands of specifications is at a great disadvantage in getting a job in today's globalizing world" (p. 23).

Many important development indicators such as fertility rates, child mortality etc., have been shown to be strongly influenced by the extent to which women are empowered. Women's empowerment itself depends on several different factors, such as their earning power, property rights, and not least their education and literacy, which is a basic ingredient.

The positive impact on the self-esteem and the feeling of empowerment of adult learners attending literacy programmes has been reported in numerous

evaluations and studies on literacy programmes all over the world. Interviews with learners, especially women, confirm their feelings of empowerment. For example, a female learner in Namibia said that before she joined the literacy programme: “I talked with my hands in front of my mouth without looking up, but now I feel strong and free to speak up” (MAASDORP in LIND, 1996, p. 86).

Literacy necessary for achieving the EFA goals

Improving literacy learning in and outside of schools is an explicit part of the EFA goals. In addition, literacy, including numeracy, is an integral part of achieving the EFA goals all together, because it is a basic learning need and a key learning tool. Solid acquisition of literacy and numeracy is one of the main learning objectives of primary education, and reading, writing and calculating continue to develop in the process of using these skills, i.e. by reading and writing to learn. Ideally, schools would be the place for learning literacy and numeracy skills needed in a society for a fulfilled everyday life. If every child in every nation had the chance to learn what he/she needed in primary education of reasonable quality, the requirements of literacy for all would be met. In such an ideal world, LLL would still be needed, but not initial literacy learning programmes for youth and adults. However, in today’s world, formal basic education is as yet neither totally inclusive nor sufficiently efficient to prevent illiteracy among adults. Formal basic education (primary education or the level of education defined in each country) will, for a long time ahead, not be enough. The two-pronged approach, traditionally advocated by UNESCO, of combining policies of UPE with targeted learning programmes for adults and youth, in which literacy is an integral part, will continue to be necessary. The adult literacy goal of the Dakar agenda, and the Literacy for All goal of the UNLD, is dependent on the achievement of all the EFA goals. The EFA goals

regarding basic education for children are in turn dependent on literate adults and literate families, who have the capabilities to encourage their children to learn and develop literacy skills and use them for all the purposes they choose to value.

Literacy integral to the MDGs and human development

Illiteracy is normally a symptom – not a direct cause – of poverty and marginalization. So combating poverty will help to diminish literacy problems, and effective poverty reduction strategies must include literacy. In spite of this, the MDGs do not explicitly include literacy. However, literacy is implicit in the two education-related MDGs, i.e. Goal 2 on UPE, targeting completion of primary school by all school-age children; and Goal 3 on gender equality, targeting gender parity at all levels of education. The latter refers to literacy in its justification: “Literacy is a fundamental skill to empower women to take control of their lives, to engage directly with authority and give them access to the wider world of learning. Educating women and giving them equal rights is important for many reasons: it increases their productivity ..., it promotes gender equality, educated women do a better job caring for children...” (www.developmentgoals.org/Gender_Equality.htm, accessed August 2004). Also, one of the indicators of this gender parity goal is the ratio of literate women to literate men among 15-24 year olds. These more or less implicit literacy targets and objectives within the MDGs deserve more attention in the global development agenda. The attainment of the overall poverty reduction goals of the MDGs actually requires the spreading and improvement of literacy skills.

Universal literacy is often seen as being necessary for economic and social development, or for everything that can be classified as human

development. There are several studies and debates about the correlations between literacy rates and economic growth. The links have been established but not the mechanisms. Studies on the economic returns of education, in terms of increased individual income and economic growth, have mostly been based on the number of years of schooling. It has been more difficult to assess the impact of literacy on such economic benefits. Nonetheless there are such studies, mainly comparing OECD countries that indicate a positive impact on earnings of cognitive skills such as literacy and numeracy (e.g. COLOMBE *et al.*, 2004 in UNESCO, 2005).

One interesting result of reviewing such studies (Cameron and Cameron, 2005) is that “the average literacy score in a given population is a better indicator of growth than the percentage of the population with very high literacy scores (COLOMBE *et al.*, 2004). In other words, a country that focuses on promoting strong literacy skills widely throughout its population will be more successful in fostering growth and well-being than one in which the gap between high-skill and low-skill groups is large” (UNESCO, 2005, 144). In all respects, human development is to a large extent about a literate and healthy population.

Several studies show that literacy, whether acquired in school or in an adult literacy programme, has a positive influence on health knowledge and behaviour, and that such an influence has a directly effect on such indicators as child mortality. This has especially been shown to be the case among adult women, although it does not seem to be a direct result of transmitting health information through literacy programmes (UNESCO, 2005).

Efforts to achieve literacy for all will not do away with poverty without other sector interventions and an overall positive political, economic, social and cultural development agenda. The development of literate societies goes hand in hand with overall development. Literacy is an individual and a

societal asset, a potential tool and a necessary ingredient of strategies to overcome poverty.

Does adult literacy matter?

As we have seen, it is not so difficult to agree on the importance of literacy when it comes about as a result of schooling. Much more controversy lies around adult literacy. The formal education system is almost always given priority over NFE for adults because it serves everyone, including those in power, and cannot be done away with.

Judging by the scarce resources dedicated to adult literacy programmes, and the enhancement of literate societies in developing countries, where most of the non-literate adults are to be found, the impression is that governments and most other possible sponsors of education and development programmes do not believe in investing in adult literacy programmes, although they often agree that increasing adult literacy rates is important for development. This attitude among governments, NGOs and donors alike is clearly a sign of lack of belief in its importance, and to some extent of a lack of confidence in the viability of adult literacy programmes.

In general, the neglect of adult literacy was reinforced by the neo-liberal model that accompanied structural adjustment programmes in the poorer countries in the mid-1980s, which envisaged a new, more restricted role of the state and decentralization trends, and often allocated even less resources for implementing social services.

NGOs and the civil society were believed to have the capacity to adapt to local circumstances and to be better than public institutions in general at delivering decentralized and diversified programmes in areas such as adult literacy.

Many governments, including those of countries with low literacy rates, seem to accept the arguments used by various donors, and especially the World Bank, for example:

- education for children is a priority and is sufficient to achieve the desired social and economic returns;
- adult literacy programmes are not cost-effective. They have a “poor track record” (ABADZI, 1994)²;
- government should limit its services to formal education, and adult literacy should be a local community concern, not a national one;
- there is very little demand from non-literate adults, most of whom are from poor families living in rural areas;
- non-literate adults have other more pressing priorities related to their survival. Practical or life skills and income-generating projects should come first, not literacy.

These arguments, put forward by powerful international agencies and governments, were reinforced by many NGOs and academics, including adult educators. For example, in reporting on the pilots of REFLECT (Regenerated Freirean Literacy Through Empowering Techniques) in Uganda, Bangladesh and El Salvador (funded by the Overseas Development Agency and the World Bank), ActionAid referred to the World Bank-commissioned study by Abadzi (1994) to justify the launching of REFLECT as the answer to the general ‘failures’ and alleged bogus claims of past adult literacy approaches (ARCHER and COTTNGHAM, 1996, p. 4). In fact,

² Past programmes of adult education, considered from a stereotypical perspective of mass literacy campaigns, if at all discussed, have been pronounced to be inefficient. The World Bank education policy document from 1995 stated: “programs of adult education are necessary, but such programs have a poor track record. One study showed an effectiveness rate of just 13 percent of adult literacy campaigns conducted over the past thirty years (Abadzi, 1994) and there has been little research into the benefits and costs of literacy programs” (World Bank, 1995: 89-90). The referred study was a World Bank-commissioned study on adult literacy acquisition that used the findings of the EWLP evaluation (see UNESCO/UNDP, 1976: 174) of selective-intensive work-oriented adult literacy programmes, but did NOT cover any studies on campaigns.

Abadzi (ibid) ignored a lot of literature reviews³, representing a wide range of documented experiences of literacy campaigns and other ABE programmes from the period after 1972. Relatively successful cases, such as those in Ecuador (1988), India (Total Literacy Campaigns initiated in 1988), and Namibia (1992 – present), were not taken into account in spite of abundant information.

In addition, it is frequently claimed that:

- literacy is not worthwhile without economic functionality, or without being “clearly oriented at helping people achieve greater justice and equity” (Archer, in UNESCO, 2003: 46);
- the information needed by people who cannot read and write to improve their lives can be and is transmitted/communicated orally, or through literate people, so they practice literacy without being literate; and
- literacy is an imposition of colonialism and the modern world, which damages traditional culture (a post-modernistic argument) and stigmatizes illiterate people (see e.g. Street, 2004).

Furthermore, there are some more hidden and more politically-oriented motives for neglect or lack of interest, such as the following:

- Adult literacy has been associated with socialism, revolutions, liberation struggles, awareness-raising and social action by the poor against social injustice and oppression. This association or perceived threat seemed rather to disappear with the Berlin wall.
- It is too expensive in relation to its low political returns. Investing in higher levels of education gives better political returns.

³ e.g. those by Bhola, (1984), Lind and Johnston (1990), Jones (1990), Rassekh (1990).

- Adult literacy is not loudly demanded, since its target group represents the poorest and most marginalized segments of a population. So politicians may find it is easy to neglect it without facing protests.
- Literacy is an asset taken for granted by academic, political and economic elites, who give little thought to the negative implications of illiteracy and the benefits of participation in initial literacy programmes.
- Non-formal adult literacy education is not considered necessary for the formal economy.
- The appropriate delivery of adult literacy is too complex, requiring shared responsibility among various ministries, and locally diversified strategies, including multiple approaches to teaching-learning languages.

Even people in communities and families with non-literate members can sometimes argue against adult literacy by referring to:

- the wish to give priority to children's education;
- lack of time due to other activities necessary for survival; and
- the belief that adults are too old to learn.

There seems thus to be a surprisingly long list of arguments against investing significantly in adult literacy and ABE programmes, especially national large-scale programmes or campaigns. One can sum them up into three categories:

- i. those asserting that literacy for adults is not important, or not a priority;
- ii. those referring to the lack of feasibility; and
- iii. those meaning that adult literacy provision has or can have negative or undesirable effects.

A critical review of the counter-arguments within each of these categories shows that they are hardly evidence-based, and that they rather

seem to correspond to political and economic interests among power elites in keeping the *status quo*, or to narrow, ethnocentric and mechanistic views of development and poverty.

“Literacy is not important, can it wait?”

In discussions on adult literacy programmes, it is often stressed that literacy is not an end in itself, or that a programme should not only or not simply teach adults to read and write. Literacy must be functional, liberating, empowering, income-generating, etc. It is not clear what these statements imply, conceptually or operationally. The message seems to be that for adults, learning to read, write and calculate cannot be useful or purposeful, that only skills other than literacy are practical, or that a learning programme has to provide all the uses of literacy. Learning and using literacy is normally based on text with a meaningful content, and should obviously be so. Maintaining the balance between learning the skills of reading, writing and written forms of calculations and learning its related content is one of the important challenges of adult literacy programme design. The claim for ‘not only literacy’ often diminishes the importance of literacy as a life skill or practical tool for coping more independently with daily challenges. Also, it can contribute to neglecting the need to include enough literacy and numeracy skills training in programme design. It actually happens that learners of so-called adult literacy programmes are not even taught to write their names because of the focus on the instrumental objectives of empowerment or development projects.⁴

The stance of not giving importance to the right to literacy of all adults implies accepting the inequalities and gaps between people with highly

⁴ This was, for example, the case of a REFLECT circle in southern Mozambique, researched in a master’s thesis (Rungo, 2004).

sophisticated literacy skills, able to access instant global information, and those without literacy skills and hardly any access to information.

Policy choices should not be a matter of primary education or non-formal adult basic education, economic development or adult literacy programmes, or awareness-raising or adult literacy programmes. These are false dichotomies because adult literacy and other educational or developmental programmes reinforce each other.

Some organizations and literacy researchers claim that literacy should come second, after empowerment or economic development projects, while others believe that programmes for non-literate adults should be integrated. If literacy is left to come second, it is not clear whether non-literate adults are expected to acquire literacy automatically after being empowered by other activities, or for how long they should wait for literacy. Integrating everything needed into one poorly funded programme is not an easy or even viable solution, as will be argued later on in this chapter. So it is neither an issue of either/or, nor of squeezing everything needed together with literacy into learning programmes for non-literate adults. Adult literacy programmes, enhanced by making environments more literacy friendly, must take place parallel to other learning and development programmes, because they depend on each other and have mutually synergetic effects on overall human development. This is because, although the causal link between literacy or education and development may be ambiguous, their influence on each other is most probably mutual and cumulative.

Others would argue that illiteracy will eventually be done away with when the old die and the educated young become adults. As earlier pointed out, this is hardly realistic considering the continuous exclusion from school of 100 million children or more and serious quality problems in formal basic education.

Non-literate people are poor and/or marginalized. Most of them have no access to literacy programmes. When programmes are provided, it is normally hard for adult literacy learners to find time and peace when struggling to survive. In addition, many potential learners lack the confidence to express their demands and participate. This is why provision has to include motivational activities, and in all possible ways facilitate participation. The right to literacy requires that access to learning actually be provided.

The benefits are well documented: Literate or educated parents are better able to support and help their children's education and are more likely to have healthy families. Adult learners, especially women, feel empowered as a result of learning literacy and participating in adult classes. Literacy strengthens the capabilities of individuals and communities to access political, economic and cultural opportunities. As an essential learning tool, literacy paves the way for further learning and education.

Is literacy too complex to be cost-effective?

It is not true that adult literacy programmes are less cost-effective than primary education for children, at least in poor developing countries. In fact, one could argue that education of adults has more immediate impact than primary education. This is how Tanzania's first President, Julius Nyerere, motivated his belief in the paramount importance of adult education when in 1964 he said in Parliament: "First we must educate adults. Our children will not have an impact on our own development for five, ten or twenty years" (cited in LIND and JOHNSTON, 1990, p. 46).

Very few studies have been done on the economic returns, or the cost-effectiveness, of adult literacy programmes. One study attempted to compare the costs and returns to investment of primary education with the

returns to adult basic education, including literacy (OXENHAM, 2002). The programmes covered in the study were projects financed by the World Bank and carried out in Ghana, Bangladesh and Senegal. The individual earnings of successful adult literacy learners were compared to those of people who had completed four years of primary education. Although some of the estimates were recognized to be rather uncertain, the findings suggested that adult literacy programmes help poor people to raise their income, and that they compared positively to the returns of primary school education.

Regarding the economic returns to investment in adult basic education as compared to primary education, the 2006 Global Monitoring Report on EFA concluded that:

“The sparse evidence that exists indicates [...] that the returns to investment in adult literacy programmes are generally comparable to, and compare favourably with, those from investments in primary education. In practice, the opportunity cost for a child to attend school is typically lower than for an adult literacy programme. Yet, the opportunity to realize the benefits is more immediate for an adult who is already in some way involved in the world of work.” (UNESCO, 2005: 145).

It is difficult to compare the costs between adult and child basic education, because so little money and resources have been allocated to adult programmes. In practice, therefore, the cost per learner has been lower for adult programmes than for primary school programmes, which is not to say they do not need more resources to uphold a better quality. The sceptics of adult literacy programmes often refer to the common high drop-out rates among adult learners (normally around 50 per cent) and the subsequent increased cost per successful learner, i.e. learners who complete the programme according to expected learning outcomes. The meaning and implications of irregular attendance and the drop-out problem will be

discussed later in this chapter. What can sometimes appear to be a case of drop-out is often an interruption considered necessary by the learner him or herself, due to such life circumstances as childbirth, illness or migration in search of work.

Available studies on costs per successful adult literacy learner compared to the cost per learner completing four years of primary education show that adult literacy was cheaper (OXENHAM, 2002; UNECSCO/UNDP, 1976). One of the studies (OXENHAM, 2002) showed that the costs per successful adult learner varied between 20 and 98 USD, or between 13 per cent and 33 per cent of the cost of four years of primary schooling. A recent survey of a sample of countries carried out by ActionAid found that the average cost per successful learner for adult literacy programmes was 68 USD in Africa, 32 USD in Asia and 61 USD in Latin America. The costs per enrolled learner ranged from 16 USD to 167 USD in developing countries. In industrialized countries the average cost per learner is much higher, for example in Ireland (742 USD) and in Canada (2,646 USD) (UNESCO, 2005).

As pointed out by TORRES (2002): “There are no bases to sustain that child [school] literacy does better than adult (out-of-school) literacy. Evidence consistently indicates [...] the poor performance of schooling in literacy acquisition, retention and use. [...] Budgets and efforts involved in trying to expand and improve primary education have no comparison with the meagre resources and efforts invested in ABE. And yet, ABE is requested to show ‘cost-efficiency’” (p.19).

The problems of sustaining literacy among learners who have completed initial literacy programmes and campaigns, and the relapse into illiteracy due to lack of follow-up, post-literacy and use of literacy, is commonly pointed out as proof of the poor track record or low cost-effectiveness of

literacy programmes. This problem should be seen as a challenge needing special attention in order to increase the benefits and use of literacy for both adult non-formal learners as well as young formal education learners. Literate environments need to be developed and adult initial literacy programmes need to be inserted into a broader adult basic education context of life-long learning opportunities. As shall be shown in forthcoming chapters, the implementation of initial adult literacy programmes in environments of stagnant economy where there is hardly any use of literacy may not be advisable as a first priority. In such situations post-literacy activities seem to be needed before introducing initial or basic literacy programmes.

Obviously, both ABE and primary education need to be injected with resources and commitment towards improved literacy acquisition, retention and use. But there is no reason to neglect adult literacy on the grounds of low cost-effectiveness. It is more a matter of political will, linked to commitment to social justice, human and democratic development. Political will and governmental leadership are also necessary to overcome reluctance to start on the grounds that the implementation process will become complex and conflicting. The misguided belief that adult literacy programmes are the sole responsibility of NGOs and not of governments also led to neglect and strengthened the unfounded idea that primary education was more cost-effective than adult literacy programmes. Above all, it confused delivery mechanisms – in which civil society plays an important role – with the necessary policy and funding frameworks that must be provided by government.

Other claims of lack of feasibility are related to the potential adult literacy learners themselves. Even if they were to be motivated, they do not have time to attend regular classes long enough to complete a programme due to

work and caring for their families (which mostly affects women). Agricultural seasons often interfere with the timetables of programmes in rural areas. Unemployed adults (mostly men) often look for jobs in places far from home and work on seasonal temporary contracts. Literacy programmes need to adapt and be flexible in addressing the challenge of available time of potential learners in different situations. When learners themselves claim they cannot participate due to lack of time, this is almost always true, although there may also be other reasons for reluctance behind this, such as shyness, lack of confidence, inadequate programme design etc.

It also happens, all over, that non-literate adults themselves, as well as policy-makers, say that they believe adults are too old to learn. But it is never too late to learn. What is true is that adults who lack or have limited literacy skills normally are poor and lack self-confidence in relation to the written word and education. They have worked hard with their hands, have often been hungry and malnourished, and have age-related sight problems at a lower average age than more wealthy literate people. So they need special attention to help raise their self-confidence and awareness of the value of their knowledge and wisdom, as well as pre-literacy exercises in holding and using a pen on paper, proper light, appropriate size and print of text, provision of spectacles etc.

Also, recent brain research has argued that adults seem to learn literacy and language skills slower than children, and that adults therefore need a lot of extensive exercising to make the processes involved in reading automatic. Abadzi (1996: 7) found that “As a result of less efficient processing, adults may not easily see adjacent symbols as combinations and may require much longer periods than children to acquire automaticity. Thus, fluent reading and expert reading skills may be more easily acquired during childhood and adolescence than during adulthood”.

Some final considerations: Is literacy negative?

Even if some of the consequences of literacy and other modernization processes may be seen as negative and possibly unavoidable, one could argue that literacy is always a potential asset when not deliberately abused. The main problem with the arguments saying that literacy for adults has negative effects, i.e. that it is oppressive, damaging to oral or traditional cultures, or stigmatizing, is that most of the time these are the opinions of people who themselves are highly literate, rather than adult literacy learners or potential learners. Even more troublesome is that most proponents of these views – mainly academics of the so-called ‘new literacy studies’ – do not believe that learners’ statements on the importance of literacy for them are genuine.

The common references worldwide to learners experience of gaining sight from learning to read and write are interpreted as being dominant policy discourse made by international organizations. For example, the following quote, relating to an Ethiopian literacy learner, is cited by Robinson-Pant (2004, p. 15) as evidence of “how little the dominant policy discourse on women’s literacy had changed” with its “emphasis on women as mothers who need to be better educated to improve their families’ lives, metaphors of rebirth, gaining sight through literacy:

“At 27, Birke enrolled in a literacy centre and, after six months’ conscientious and courageous attendance, despite her family and domestic obligations, she began, she said ‘to be aware of many things. It is like being reborn, like a blind person recovering his or her sight. I had never dared hope something like that could happen to me’ (UNESCO, 1988, p. 1)”.

Anyone who has seen adult women or men say such things with pride and conviction can but be convinced of their authenticity.

The political motives for not promoting adult literacy reflect the political nature of literacy both as an issue and a process. Literacy plays different roles depending on the specific political, socio-cultural and economic context of a literacy programme. Literacy programmes have specific ideological or religious aims, often reflected in the contents of the programme; they require a certain participation in organizing, mobilizing, learning and discussing; and finally the skill itself provides a tool for further learning and acquisition of information that might be political. Governing elites may in certain contexts therefore feel threatened by adult literacy activities. Literacy programmes as such do not, however, have such revolutionary effects, even if literacy can help popular movements to engage in social transformation. A literacy programme can also help to encourage learners to demand their rights or to act together to solve certain problems or to achieve a specific goal, but will not in itself lead to the creation of opposition movements.

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Autora

Agneta Lind

Docente da área de Educação de Adultos na Universidade de Eduardo Mondlane em Mozambique e como consultora da UNESCO da Iniciativa de Literacia para Potencialização – *Empowerment* (LIFE).

Contato: lindagneta@hotmail.com

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